

Rawlings-Blake looks to legacy of full term

By Julie Scharper
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As Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake embarks on a full four-year term after Tuesday's election victory, she faces the challenge of forging a legacy in a city grappling with decades of decline and years of financial shortfalls.

Some political analysts and civic leaders said Rawlings-Blake, 41, should set an ambitious agenda focusing on one of the city's persistent problems, such as blight caused by vacant houses, while others said she should focus on fiscal stewardship and management of basic city services.

Top aides in her administration say that she wants to bolster the city's population and that all of her initiatives — from the loftiest to the most mundane — are tied to that goal.

"We have big challenges to confront. Old fears to overcome. And tough decisions to make to get Baltimore growing again," the mayor said last night at a celebration at a Locust Point restaurant. "But if we have learned anything in the past 20 months, it is that Baltimore can go against the odds and win."

Democrat Rawlings-Blake easily won in her first bid for the office, beating Republican Alfred V. Griffin III by a wide margin. She became mayor in February 2010 when, as city council president, she ascended to the position after Sheila Dixon's resignation amid a corruption scandal. The election drew a low turnout — fewer than 10 percent of registered voters cast ballots —

after a more competitive primary in the heavily Democratic city.

Former Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke said Rawlings-Blake's most pressing need is to energize city residents and boost their morale. "The biggest challenge is that she will have to instill in people a sense of optimism about the city when the national economic picture is so bleak," said Schmoke, a three-term mayor who is now the dean of Howard University's law school.

"Communication strategy is very important," said Schmoke. "Basically, she's got to keep the campaign mode going in some ways, to go out and tell people what she wants to do and why."

Since Rawlings-Blake succeeded Dixon, she has moved cautiously, avoiding dramatic shake-ups in city government. Matthew Crenson, a political science professor emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University, said she should now focus on crafting more ambitious initiatives.

"She needs to come up with at least one Big Idea, in capital letters — something that's really innovative that addresses major problems in the city," Crenson said.

"She needs to show that in addition to being a good solid manager, she and her policy-making staff can come up with the program that can solve a serious city problem," he said.

But Donald F. Norris, chair of the public policy department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, said Rawlings-Blake should focus on running the cash-strapped city efficiently.

"Will she have signature achievements? I'm not sure," said Norris. "The bottom line is going to be the quality of her stewardship of the city of Baltimore."

Rawlings-Blake, daughter of the late Del. Howard P. Rawlings, is no stranger to politics.

She became the youngest member of the City Council when elected at age 25 in 1995. Her peers appointed her council president when Dixon became mayor in 2006, and she was elected to that office in 2007.

In her first full term as mayor, she will continue to guide the city at a time of daunting challenges.

Hundreds of schoolchildren, teachers and parents protested near City Hall last week, demanding a plan for finding the estimated \$2.8 billion needed to repair and construct schools. And the previous week, hundreds of children and parents packed a meeting of a Recreation and Parks advisory board, asking for a halt to a plan that could lead to the closure of many recreation centers. Finance officials recently predicted the fourth consecutive year of a significant shortfall in the city's budget.

Meanwhile, crime rates, although improving, still place Baltimore among the country's most dangerous cities.

There are 47,000 vacant homes in the city, according to the latest U.S. Census, and the city's population has shrunk by 30,000 residents in the past decade.

A spokesman said Rawlings-Blake's ultimate goal is to reverse the decades of population decline. "The theme that you're going to see in the next four years is how to grow the city and make Baltimore a better place to live and work," said spokesman Ryan O'Doherty.

O'Doherty said Rawlings-Blake's motto since her days as City Council president — "Better Schools, Safer Streets, Stronger Neighborhoods" — speaks to that goal.

"The next step is to say we're doing these things as a means to an end, and that end is to grow the city," he said.

cont. O'Doherty said that many initiatives that Rawlings-Blake laid the groundwork for in her first year and a half in office would come to fruition in the next four years. He pointed out that homeowners will see a small reduction in their property tax bill next year, the first year of her plan to reduce property tax rates by 9 percent over nine years.

In January, a task force formed by Rawlings-Blake to draft a 10-year solution to the city's fiscal challenges is slated to present its findings.

"We're not going to be able to do anything unless we have a strong fiscal background," O'Doherty said. Task force members are looking at solutions to rein in the exploding costs of benefits and pensions for city employees.

Rawlings-Blake will soon unveil a strategy to pay for the severe maintenance needs at public schools, O'Doherty said. She has already laid out a plan to streamline the housing department and expedite the sale of vacant homes, he said. And she has announced an overhaul of the city's poorly maintained and understaffed rec centers, which would devote resources to improving 30 centers, turning over others to private groups or closing them.

Crenson pointed out that one of Rawlings-Blake's most prominent initiatives, the Grand Prix race, has shown mixed results.

After championing the race since her tenure as City Council president, the mayor through her aides threatened this week to sever ties with the group that organized the inaugural three-day racing festival, claiming it owed the city more than \$1.5 million in unpaid taxes and fees.

Crenson said the Grand Prix was another in a long series of projects that city leaders have laid out in the past three decades that

focused on drawing visitors to the Inner Harbor area. Officials are also toying with the idea of building a new arena to attract performers and conferences.

"The idea that we pump money into facilities in the city's center that are going to bring a lot of visitors, we've been doing that since the 1970s and it doesn't seem to be doing any good," he said.

Crenson suggested that Rawlings-Blake focus on enhancing Baltimore for residents.

"How can we use or magnify our assets to solve our problems?" he asked.

Schmoke said Rawlings-Blake could elevate the mood of the city by homing in on small projects that would show residents quick results.

"How do you let people know it's going to be better in the city? Take some small things and do them well," Schmoke said. "It doesn't have to be big stuff, just the sense that things are getting better."